

Growth digs at Rico's past

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Denver Post Four Corners Bureau

12/10/62

RICO — It is one of the last Colorado mountain mining towns yet to choose, or succumb to, life as a resort, tourist trap or bedroom community.

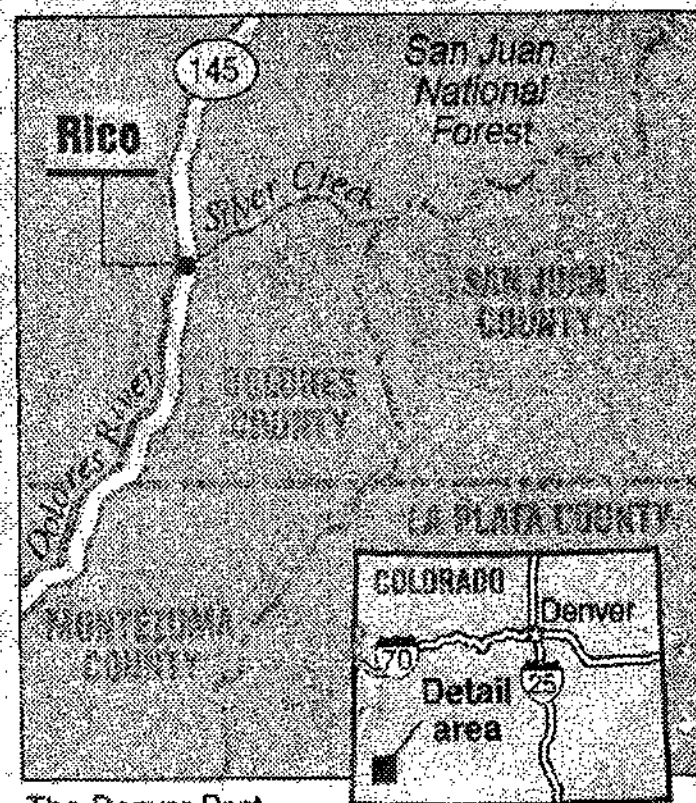
The 200 or so Ricoans living at the foot of Expectation Mountain are caught between a mining past and a future in which would-be developers from Atlanta, Phoenix and Telluride envision hundreds of vacation homes on the town's virgin slopes and in the Dolores River Valley.

Aspen, Telluride, Steamboat Springs and towns all over the Rocky Mountains have arrived at this crossroads one by one since the 1960s and chosen their paths, which were mostly intensive real estate development and tourism. Ski runs, boutiques, glitterati and a low-paid service class have replaced the miners who wrested mineral wealth from the mountains through brute force.

In this state, Rico is one of the few beautiful old

Reckoning for Rico

Rico is a town caught between its mining past and a future that could change the look and character of the town.



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The Denver Post

Resistance to growth runs

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owns that have not yet desired places in the modern day Rico, which sprang to 79 with a big silver strike enterprise Mine, seems to have aged little in the years since mining abandoned it. The town is still eyeing what its future

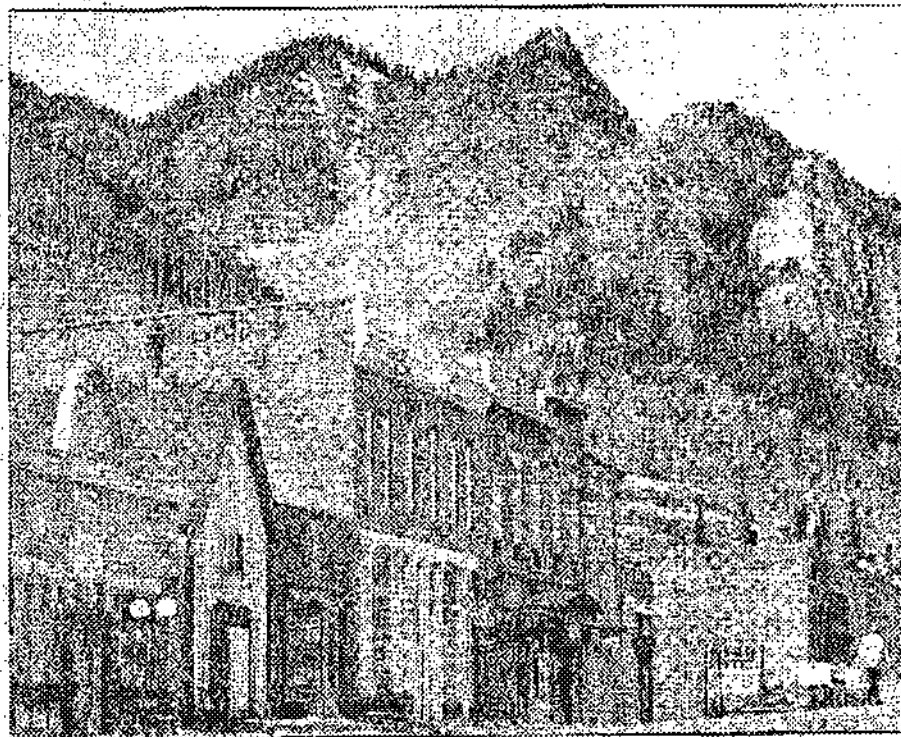
is going to be. "It's a Colorado town like no other," town manager Eric Heil says. "One town should be guided by the community that lives there and not outside investors. We don't feel like the servants in town."

They may not want to grow up. "Rico Renaissance, partners bought up close to three square miles of town and surroundings for roughly \$5 million, has plans. The investors and consultants call Rico a development opportunity. They could create a walkable, sustainable community to 500 new homes."

It's a development opportunity. The town blossomed up by the '70s, '80s. The town just went to sleep. Erin Johnson, a Cortez architect with Strategic Design, is the latest in a long line of Renaissance managers. "Now it is scared to death to do

it. I don't want to be like Telluride, which glitters some 30 miles beyond Head Pass to the

mountains are nice enough to live in and only cranky with the weather when they feel like it. Once, the former owner of a gas station in Rico would sell customers supplies in retaliation for perceived affronts. A formally model dog once lived on one of the pumps, and he was banned for



Special to The Denver Post / Don Knight

In its heyday, the mining town of Rico boasted a population of about 5,000. Today, around 200 residents live there.

months.

There is hickering in town, Heil says, but plenty more goodwill. And the memory of whatever Ricoans left behind when they escaped to this ghost town in the San Juan Mountains has united them enough to butt heads for more than a decade with a series of outside investor groups.

Equally stubborn about Rico's independence are the few old-timers still standing and a tough breed of newcomers, 30- and 40-something entrepreneurs, who last decade invented ways to make a living here. They brought Rico back from the brink of neglect and decline after its population had dwindled from several thousand to the low double digits in the 1980s.

But, also during the past two decades, real estate investors from Texas to New York bought up

enough old mining claims, splinters of land each about 10 acres, to become the absentee landlord of some 1,600 to 1,800 acres, never fully surveyed, in and around Rico.

The most recent big buyer, Rico Renaissance, was the brainchild of Manhattan tax attorney Jack Duksin. He gave up life in the Big Apple to live in Telluride, but it was Rico he and his investment partners had designs on.

"It's not like they came to town with a vision. They came to town to make a buck," says Jon Kornbluth, owner of Bluecorn Beeswax candles. "Now they want to get enough (development rights) from the town to wrap a bow on Rico and sell it."

Duksin vowed to work with the town. He brought in investors Mike Hines of Atlanta, Olie Swanky of Phoenix and Bill Baird of Tellu-

in mining town's veins

d, at the moment, Quebec. Driving-force Duxin died a few years ago. Ricoans say the others never show their faces. They did not return calls from the Denver Post. A hoarse voice answered his cellphone but he could not talk because of his.

"Are these people?" Ricoan "Red" Wolfe asked at a recent meeting. "They bought a bunch of scattered, toxic land that are worth little unless you make some trades with Forest Service for our public land. The town's partner should be Forest Service, not Rico Renaissance."

Johnson says Rico Renaissance sold Rico on the market for a few years at \$6 million to \$8 million but had no takers. A modern system, which the town did not have but is contemplating, could certainly increase buy-ers, she says.

It alone could be enough to attract townspeople to opt to forgo modern amenity, Heil says.

Water supply is also a question mark. Until the town makes ties to its system and joins the local Water Conservancy District it can barely support its current population, let alone any more, Heil says.

"We're a small town. Our issues are small," he says.

For example, there are the metals pouring out of a tunnel two of the old abandoned complex on the Dolores River, a mile north of town. That has to be cleaned up.

The Environmental Protection Agency is suing a dissolved corporation and the estates of the corporation's dead former officials under the Clean Water Act. That case is dragging along. EPA enforcement attorney Sheldon Muller

And while Rico's small-town ways are highly prized, it is a tough place to make a go of it.

"We're not trying to destroy the town," Johnson says. "It needs to grow to survive. The town can't get over its anger to see what is good about the plan."

There is a nationally known candlestick maker here, Kornbluth, but there is no butcher or baker. There is no grocery store, except the gas station's mini-mart.

Kornbluth's candles sell like rockets over the Internet. And Rico has a few other business highlights, such as the chef with five-star credentials at the Argentine Grill. There is the regionally famous Rico Theatre and Café, which, during the summer, packs in twice the town's population to hear the likes of the Dixie Chicks.

But Lynn Lang, whose small video store folded, now works for Rico Renaissance. She says she wants something more to happen here.

"The town is dying. We've got to do something," Lang says. "It's too hard to make a living here."

The town's master plan, which Rico Renaissance is trying to amend, envisions half as many new homes, up to 200, and mostly single-family houses, with some apartments along the main drag, Glasgow Avenue. The Rico Planning Commission held a hearing on the developers' proposal last week, and it will continue it in late January.

All but a few of the 60 people who jammed last week's session spoke passionately against changing the master plan. The few dozen comment letters received were nearly unanimous in their opposition.

But an owner of one of the dozen pretty homes in the new Silver Glance subdivision, which is about all Rico Renaissance has to show

for its eight years in town, came somewhat nervously to his feet in the meeting. After apologizing a few times for being just a new owner, Richard Gardella said:

"I came here because I didn't like a big Northeastern urban environment. But a town with just a liquor store and a Conoco, that's a little too small for me."

Wouldn't a music store be nice? he asked. No response.

Most Ricoans, however, dearly want their own school. The town's couple dozen schoolchildren must travel up to 80 miles a day through icy canyons or over high mountain passes to attend schools in Telluride or Dolores.

The town is voting Jan. 14 on whether to leave Dolores County School District to join the more affluent Telluride School District, which might help support a Rico schoolhouse, kindergarten through fifth grade. The poor Dolores district would not.

The town wants to grow some, and slowly, Heil says, but it does not want to play host to hundreds of condos owned by rich people who only visit a few weeks a year. Nor, he says, does Rico want to be home to big apartment complexes, shelter for the hard-pressed-to-find-housing workforces of Telluride and Mountain Village.

Meanwhile, many in town, such as Heil, hope that the Trust for Public Lands will consider obtaining federal funding to buy some of the land around Rico for conservation. The trust has done so in other mining districts around the San Juan National Forest, such as its purchases on Red Mountain Pass near Silverton and Ouray.

Johnson says that could happen, if the price is right for Rico Renaissance.

And the price had better be high; after all, Rico is the Spanish word for rich.